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MEMORANDUM

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THE 1958 TAIWAN STRAITS CRISIS:
A DOCUMENTED HISTORY (U)

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PREFACE

✓ This Memorandum is one of the products of continuing research undertaken by RAND for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) on crisis management and the control of limited war situations. It is a companion piece to the author's RM-4803-ISA, The 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis: An Analysis (U), Secret, published in January of 1966.

The earlier Memorandum presented the author's analysis of the 1958 situation and suggested lessons to be drawn from it for those concerned with decision-making in crises. For ease of access and use, it was published at a lower level of classification, eschewing the citation of highly sensitive source materials, and was consequently analytical rather than historical in approach.

For the close student of crisis management, however, it seemed desirable to make available the present more comprehensive and detailed account of the Taiwan Straits crisis, despite -- or perhaps even because of -- the sensitivity of the sources available to the author. This detailed history stems from the author's extensive access to government papers relating to the events of the summer and fall of 1958 in the Far East, including most particularly classified files in the Department of State and the Department of Defense. He also consulted materials at Headquarters, CINCPAC and the Taiwan Defense Command in Taipei. Additional background was obtained by interviews with most of the leading decision makers who participated in policy formation at that time.

SUMMARY

The first sign of a possible crisis in the Taiwan Straits came on June 30, 1958, when the Chinese Communists demanded a resumption of the Sino-American ambassadorial talks. The first military action came in late July in the form of air clashes over the Taiwan Straits and the Chinese mainland. During July the Chinese Nationalists began to anticipate a Communist move against the Offshore Islands. Urging the United States to commit itself publicly to the defense of the Offshore Islands, they also sought modern equipment for their armed forces, including the delivery of American Sidewinder missiles.

While the United States refused to issue a public statement indicating that it would defend Quemoy, it did increase its military assistance to the Government of the Republic of China (GRC) and began intensive contingency planning for a crisis in the Taiwan Straits. The basic policy of the American government was that it would help defend the Offshore Islands only if necessary for the defense of Taiwan. American officials in the field, however, were authorized to assist the GRC in planning for the defense of the Islands, and assumed that nuclear weapons would be used to counter anything but very light probing by the Chinese Communists.

In early August, officials in Washington became concerned with the possibility of a crisis, although they did not expect the Chinese Communists to launch a major military attack. During that same month, a consensus developed that a high-level decision should be made as to

what the American reaction would be to an air-sea interdiction campaign against the Offshore Islands. There was also strong pressure for a diplomatic warning to the Chinese Communists that the United States would not tolerate the fall of Quemoy.

On August 22 it was decided, just below the presidential level, that the United States would participate in the defense of the Offshore Islands if they came under attack. It was agreed that, as an attempt to deter a Chinese Communist move, a public statement clarifying the American position would be issued in the form of an exchange of letters between Secretary of State Dulles and Representative Thomas Morgan.

THE CRISIS ERUPTS: THE U.S. DECISION TO INTERVENE

On August 23, 1958, at 6:30 p.m. Taiwan time, the Chinese Communists launched a heavy artillery attack against the Quemoy Islands. Although anticipated by a number of planners, the attack provoked a re-evaluation of American policy toward the Offshore Islands.

During the weekend of August 23 and 24, officials in the Pentagon and the State Department worked on position papers for a meeting to be held at the White House on the 25th. The basic position paper of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, like most of the subsequent papers, was prepared in the political-military section of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. Urging the United States to involve itself in the defense of the Offshore Islands, this paper stated bluntly that, although initial operations might have to be conventional for political reasons,

atomic strikes against the Chinese mainland would eventually be necessary if the Chinese Communist move was to be stopped effectively and quickly. At this meeting, approval was given to the Navy paper authorizing CINCPAC to reinforce American capability and to prepare to escort supply ships to the Offshore Islands. CINCPAC was also authorized to prepare to assist in the event of a major assault against Quemoy. Aware of the problems that would arise if the Chinese Nationalists were to know the full extent of the American commitment to the Offshore Islands, Washington ordered the Taiwan Defense Commander not to inform the GRC of planned American moves. [It was also decided that American interests in the Offshore Islands would be limited to the islands of Big and Little Quemoy and the five larger islands in the Matsu chain.]

American officials on Hawaii and Taiwan approved of Washington's decisions, [taking exception only to the possibility that initial actions might have to be conventional.] CINCPAC responded by ordering his subordinate commanders to prepare a conventional-weapon annex for the existing operations plan. [At the same time, in the last week of August, American military actions in the Taiwan Straits and in the Far East in general were substantially stepped up as a means of communicating American determination to the Chinese Communists. The Chinese Nationalists, who were reacting favorably to the steps taken by the United States, continued to press for a public statement that America would regard an attack on Quemoy as an attack on Taiwan. They also asked for an American convoy to Quemoy and stand-by authority for the Taiwan Defense

Commander to participate in the defense of Quemoy in the event of an all-out Chinese Communist assault. By August 28, American officials in the field were reporting that the critical issue was the supplying of Quemoy, and attention then came to be focused on this problem.

THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PROBE (August 23-31)

The Chinese Communist attack began with the firing of some 40,000 shells against the Quemoy Islands on August 23, 1958. The initial fire was directed at a ceremony welcoming the Chinese Nationalist Defense Minister to Quemoy. Following this, the Chinese Communists, by a combination of artillery fire and PT boat action, succeeded in preventing any landing of supplies until American escorted convoys began to sail on September 7. Artillery fire remained heavy during the first two weeks of the crisis and was directed mainly at incoming convoys. At the same time, a number of air engagements took place in which the Chinese Nationalists very quickly demonstrated their superiority over the Chinese Communists.

During the first two weeks of the crisis, Chinese Communist propaganda tended to play down the events in the Taiwan Straits. The People's Daily simply reported what was in fact taking place. Soviet propaganda followed the same line by denying that a major crisis was occurring. The Chinese Communists, however, did begin to beam a series of radio broadcasts at Quemoy, calling upon the garrison to surrender and warning that it was cut off and isolated.

THE U.S. DECISION TO ESCORT

Following the decision to prepare for escort and the tacit decision that the United States would defend the Offshore Islands, planning in Washington focused on moves for detering a Chinese Communist invasion of Quemoy. The Government also began to issue a series of public statements strongly suggesting that the United States would be involved in the defense of Quemoy. Concern even came to be expressed at high-level meetings that the Chinese Nationalists might not be doing all they could to deal with the situation and might indeed be trying to pull the United States into a major war with the Chinese Communists.

A second meeting at the White House on August 29 authorized American escorts for GRC convoys to within three miles of Quemoy. This decision was immediately disclosed to the GRC, and plans were made for such conveying.

THE CHINESE COMMUNISTS REASSESS THEIR STRATEGY

Intense Chinese Communist military action against the Offshore Islands began to taper off early in September. The Nationalists, increasingly confident that the United States would undertake escort operations, began to reduce substantially their efforts to resupply the Islands. At the same time, the Chinese Communists brought their artillery action to a virtual ceasefire after September 2. Chinese Communist propaganda continued to play down the crisis but did begin to report some criticism of the

American position in the West. On September 4, the Chinese Communists announced their claim to a twelve-mile limit, which would put all of the Offshore Islands within their territorial waters. On September 5, Pravda stated in an "Observer" article that the Soviet Union could not "stand idly by" if things happened "on the frontier territory of its great ally," and that an attack on the mainland would cause the Soviet Union to help the Chinese Communists. On September 6, Chinese Communist Premier Chou En-lai issued a public statement offering to reopen the Sino-American ambassadorial talks. The Chinese Communist People's Daily devoted most of its front page to Chou's statement and thereafter began to publicize the developing crisis. Meanwhile, the Mainland Chinese inaugurated a series of public meetings calling for the liberation of Taiwan.

THE U.S. DECISION TO DEFEND QUEMOY

American officials hoped that increased American military action in the Taiwan Straits, including the escort of GRC supply vessels to within three miles of Quemoy as well as American public statements, would alleviate the crisis by both detering a Chinese Communist invasion and breaking the blockade. The series of American statements publicly expressing U.S. interest in keeping Quemoy out of Chinese Communist hands reached a climax after Secretary Dulles met with President Eisenhower at Newport, Rhode Island. In a formal statement, the American Government announced that the security of Taiwan had become increasingly related to the defense of Quemoy. Following this statement, Dulles held a press briefing

in which he went very far toward making clear the American determination to defend Quemoy.

While marking time in their efforts to resupply the Islands, the GRC began pressing the United States for permission to bomb the mainland and for greater American involvement in the crisis. American officials on Taiwan, urging restraint on the GRC, went forward with plans for an escorted convoy, scheduled to set sail on September 7.

On September 2, Dulles met with members of the Joint Chiefs and other top officials to formulate the basic American position in the crisis and to define American policy in the event of a Chinese Communist invasion of the Offshore Islands. At this meeting there was considerable debate on the question of to what extent Quemoy could be defended without nuclear weapons and on the more general question of the wisdom of relying on nuclear weapons for deterrence. The consensus reached was that the use of nuclear weapons would ultimately be necessary for the defense of Quemoy, but that the United States should limit itself initially to using conventional forces.

The next meeting on September 3 authorized a formal paper urging the President to agree to an American defense of the Offshore Islands. At the same time, it was recognized that it was important to make unmistakably clear to the Chinese Communists that the United States was prepared to intervene in order to deter a possible Chinese Communist move. Following this, Eisenhower met with Dulles at Newport, and then the President returned to Washington for another White House consultation on the crisis. This meeting considered a paper prepared by the

Joint Chiefs on proposed American policy in the event of a Communist invasion of Quemoy.

At the White House meeting on September 6, the President authorized the Joint Chiefs to employ American conventional forces in the event of a major assault on the Offshore Islands. Nuclear weapons were to be used only with the President's permission.

THE PROLONGED BLOCKADE: COMMUNIST MOVES (September 7-October 6)

On the morning of September 7, the first U.S. escorted Chinese Nationalist convoy set out for Quemoy. The convoy beached in Lialo Bay without interference and with no Chinese Communist artillery fire. The beaching operation, however, was so inept as to lead the Taiwan Defense Command to propose a halt in convoy operations until techniques could be corrected. The Chinese Nationalists rejected this delay and, on September 8, the second convoy set out with a reduced escort. Two hours after the convoy reached the beach, the Chinese Communists opened fire with a heavy barrage that prevented the landing of any supplies. Through the month of September the Chinese Nationalists sent to Quemoy a series of American-escorted convoys that came under moderate to heavy Communist artillery fire and, until late in the month, succeeded in landing only very small quantities of supplies. Attempts were also made to land supplies by aerial drop, a technique that also improved in late September. Several air battles ensued, in which the Chinese Nationalists, using the American Sidewinder missiles, markedly outclassed the Chinese Communists and destroyed a number of MIGs.

Chinese Communist propaganda, foreign and domestic, focused on the crisis during September and early October. On September 8, Soviet Premier Khrushchev, in a letter to President Eisenhower, gave strong support to the Chinese Communist position. An attack on China, he warned, would be considered an attack on the Soviet Union and the Soviets would do everything to defend the security of both states. Khrushchev also argued that the Chinese Communist operation against the Offshore Islands was a purely internal affair. During this period the Chinese began to issue a series of warnings against American intrusion into Chinese Communist territory, a series they have continued into the present. In mid-September, Chinese Communist propaganda appeared to be aimed at minimizing the consequences of their failure to take Quemoy and, at the same time, at exacerbating US-GRC relations. On September 19, Khrushchev sent a second letter to Eisenhower warning that a world war was possible and that the Soviet Union would honor its commitments to Communist China. The letter was rejected by the American Government.

THE PROLONGED BLOCKADE: REACTION ON TAIWAN AND
IN THE FIELD

From September 7 to October 6, the GRC, with U.S. military assistance and convoy support, gradually improved its ability to land supplies on Quemoy. It also continued to press for greater United States involvement in the crisis and for permission to bomb the mainland. While GRC officials still affirmed that they would try to honor

their commitment to consult the United States before attacking the mainland, they stressed that attacks on the mainland might be necessary. Apparently the GRC was still trying to manipulate events so as to draw the United States into a greater military involvement against the Chinese Communists. U.S. officials in the field, attempting to develop an accurate picture of the resupply situation on Quemoy, sought to aid the GRC resupply effort and to demonstrate to the Chinese Communists that the United States would be involved in the defense of the Offshore Islands. In addition, military officers were engaged in crash planning for possible large-scale conventional operations in the Taiwan Straits. This contingency planning produced a bitter reaction among some officials, who felt that large-scale conventional operations were unrealistic.

THE PROLONGED BLOCKADE: PUBLIC DEBATE AND DECISION MAKING

During September, public opposition to American involvement in defense of the Offshore Islands continued to mount in the United States and abroad. American officials were aware of this opposition and felt constrained by it. The United States sought to answer its critics in a series of public statements and to warn Peking that the United States would be involved in the defense of Quemoy. In a major address on September 11, President Eisenhower indicated that Quemoy would not be permitted to fall.

There was considerable uncertainty in Washington during September as to whether or not the Communist blockade could be broken by American-escorted convoys.

During this period some attention was given to the possibility of a negotiated settlement. Proposals to demilitarize the Offshore Islands, originating in the highest office of the State Department, met with considerable skepticism from lower State Department officials and from the Navy. But American officials were generally agreed both on the need to defend the Offshore Islands in the event of assault and also on the need to explain publicly the American position. At the same time, a consensus was developing that the Chinese Nationalists were seeking to drag the United States into a major military clash and that these efforts had to be resisted.

The question of whether or not the blockade could be broken became of considerable importance in Washington decision making. By September 25, American officials had concluded that the blockade could be broken and that there was no need to pursue a diplomatic course toward a political settlement.

Following Chou En-lai's public statement on September 6 urging reopening of the Sino-American talks, the United States publicly reaffirmed its willingness, privately conveyed to the Chinese Communists prior to August 23, to resume the talks at an ambassadorial level. After some further negotiations with the Chinese Communists as well as the Chinese Nationalists, U.S. Ambassador Jacob Beam held the first of the renewed Warsaw talks with Chinese Communist Ambassador Wang on September 15. During this and subsequent meetings, the United States pressed for a ceasefire in the Taiwan Straits while the Chinese Communists demanded that the United States withdraw from the Taiwan area.

THE CHINESE COMMUNIST CEASEFIRE (October 6)

On October 6, 1958, in a radio broadcast from Peking, the Chinese Communist Defense Minister announced that there would be a one-week ceasefire if the United States ceased to escort GRC convoys. Chinese Communist military fire did in fact come to a halt. Following the ceasefire, Chinese Communist propaganda began to stress disputes between the United States and the Chinese Nationalists. On October 13, the Chinese Communists announced that they were continuing the ceasefire for another two weeks. However, on October 20, the Chinese Communists announced that they were resuming their fire because an American ship had intruded into Chinese Communist territorial waters. On October 25, they said that they were again suspending their fire. This time they declared that they would not fire on even-numbered days against airfields, beaches, and wharves if there were no American escort. This odd-even day fire pattern has continued to the present writing. Following this latest ceasefire, Chinese Communist propaganda took the line that they had never been interested in capturing only the Offshore Islands but were determined instead to capture both Taiwan and the Offshore Islands at the same time.

THE CEASEFIRE PERIOD IN WASHINGTON AND TAIPEI

The Chinese proclamation that its ceasefire would continue only so long as the United States did not escort convoys touched off debates between the United States and the GRC. The GRC urged the United States to escort

convoys during the initial ceasefire period going in on the odd days, but the United States refused on the grounds that there was no military necessity for convoys. Dulles then began to press for a reduction in the Chinese Nationalist garrison on Quemoy in order to give the impression that the United States had gone about as far as it could in pursuing a policy opposed by its allies and by the American public. On October 21, Dulles arrived on Taiwan. In a series of meetings with Chiang Kai-shek, he pressed Chiang for a public statement renouncing the use of force in any attempt to return to the mainland and succeeded in getting GRC acceptance to a communiqué stating this point. It was also agreed that there would be a limited reduction of the garrison on Quemoy in return for increased U.S. military fire power on the Islands.